Do Economically Self-Sufficient Refugees Start in the U.S. from Nothing?

Refugee research frequently finds that in the first years after arrival to the United States, refugees tend to follow the “blank slate hypothesis”—that context effects dominate the explanation of refugee outcomes. However, new assimilation theory contends assimilation also depends on the education and work experiences of individuals. This project analyzes these contending predictions with the Annual Survey of Refugees (n=6025 households) and contrasts these theoretical expectations through logit modeling whether a refugee household is living in the United States without using any public assistance programs. The results indicate neither perspective alone could predict refugee economic assimilation adequately alone, though I find more support for assimilation theories than the blank-slate hypothesis. Additionally, despite bureaucratic emphasis on rapid employment for refugees, there is no evidence this is related to self-sufficiency, and in fact those resettled under this priority have decreased odds of self-sufficiency as their residencies go on.

At the end of 2021, there were at least 89.3 million displaced people in the world, 1 out of 88 people globally (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2020; USA for UNHCR 2022). This proportion has grown to levels not seen since World War II (UNHCR 2020). Refugees, who make up a large portion of the displaced population, are people who cannot live in their home countries because they fear for their lives (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2010). Refugees come with unique experiences, and they contribute to their resettlement communities. For example, resettled refugees, on average, pay more taxes to the United States over their lifetimes than they receive from public assistance program use (Evans and Fitzgerald 2017).

The United States has been a leading resettlement location for United Nations recognized refugees, having resettled more than 3.1 million refugees since 1970. However, many Americans are and have been concerned that incoming refugees and migrants may become free riders on public programs. This concern was first codified into law in the public charge law of 1882, and continues to motivate the public charge laws of today (Cincinnati and Graham 2001).

Researchers have identified conflicting predictions about the economic self-sufficiency outcomes of refugees. The blank slate hypothesis (Gold 1991; Tran and Lara-García 2020) holds that the human capital of refugees does not predict their outcomes in the United States. It uses contexts (and the interaction with contexts) to analyze recently arrived refugee outcomes. However, new assimilation theory asserts that, while context effects are important, migrant capital, including human capital, should be central assimilation predictors.

Researchers have analyzed refugee economic outcomes, but seldom using the Annual Survey of Refugees. I use the Annual Survey of Refugees and binary logit modeling to analyze the effects of pre/post-resettlement human capital and pre/post-resettlement contexts on economic self-sufficiency.

The impact of pre/post-migration human capital and pre/post-migration context effects across specific types of refugee economic assimilation are not entirely understood. Theory emphasizes either pre/post resettlement human capital or pre/post resettlement context effects. To compare these two approaches, I ask three research questions: 1) How do pre/post- migration human capital affect refugee economic self-sufficiency in the U.S.? 2) How do pre/post- migration context factors (e.g., national identity or region resettled to) shape economic self-sufficiency? 3) What is the relative importance of human capital and context factors in shaping refugee economic self-sufficiency?

BACKGROUND

*Refugee as a legal status*

“Refugee” is a legal status, recognized in international law and by the United States. The vast majority of U.S.-bound refugees are referred to the U.S. by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (United States Department of State, United States Department of Homeland Security, and United States Department of Health and Human Services 2021). Refugees do not choose to resettle to the U.S. The United Nations clears refugees for resettlement after collecting some personal data and then U.S. agencies begin their own vetting processes to select refugees. Refugee admission levels are determined by the President, who is counseled by the State Department and resettlement agencies.

*Origins of refugees recently resettled to the United States*

Refugees come from diverse backgrounds and situations; these experiences may impact how refugees resettle in the United States. Most refugees admitted between 2011-2018 come from Burma/Myanmar, Iraq, Iran, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) (Triplett and Wilter 2020). The pre- resettlement experiences of these groups differ significantly.

Most of the Iranian refugees arriving in the United States are fleeing religious or social persecution (Koirala and Eshghavi 2017). Like many other refugees from predominantly Islamic countries, Iranian refugees report some persecution from Americans after resettlement (Koirala and Eshghavi 2017). Most Burmese refugees do not speak English at all or speak English very poorly (Annual Survey of Refugees 2016-2019). Iraqis tend to have similar rates of college completion as Americans but higher rates of high school dropout (Capps et al. 2015). Possibly because of their higher levels of educational attainment, Iraqis tend to have higher reserve wages than other groups (the lowest wage a person will consider working for) (Tran and Lara-Garcia 2020). The social structures in Somalia are strained. Many benefits of a government (travel, exchange of money, and general rule of law) are rarities. In contrast to Iraqi refugees, Somalis tend to work for low wages. Somali families tend to be larger, but the median Somali household earns $19,061, well below the poverty threshold in the United States for the average Somali household of four (Chambers 2017). Many of the refugees arriving in the United States from DR Congo are “at-risk women” (UNHCR 2013). Additionally, many Congolese refugees report feeling isolated and overwhelmed (Wachter et al. 2016). Refugees have many experiences, but do these differences predict outcomes?

Nearly 50% of refugee households have one member (Annual Survey of Refugees 2016-2019). Fewer than 15% of refugee arrivals have more than five people in their group (Annual Survey of Refugees 2016-2019). Most refugees are resettled into the U.S.’s “South” census region (Annual Survey of Refugees 2016-2019). The states that resettle the most refugees, from most to least, are California, Washington, Texas, and New York. (United States Department of State 2021; United States Department of Health and Human Services 2021). These four states together account for about 30% of the refugees resettled during fiscal year 2020.

*The importance of economic self-sufficiency*

Federal departments overseeing refugees hope to prevent refugees from becoming public charges by encouraging economic self-sufficiency. The U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement and the Population, Refugee, and Migration Bureau of the State Department both view economic self-sufficiency as a fundamental focus (United States Office of Refugee Resettlement 2018:11; United States Department of State 2021:1). Researchers such as Fix, Hooper, and Zong (2017) question whether this focus on rapid employment may result in worse outcomes for refugees because they find poor employment matches for their situations: economic needs, mastered skills, or other obligations. The goal of rapid employment targets two related variables

Economic self-sufficiency is an important outcome for government agencies because it correlates with many other outcomes. Economically self-sufficient households are less likely to work illegal or dangerous jobs. Self-sufficient households have more resources to invest in their dependents. Instead of investing time looking for more resources, households can invest that time in education and skills training. Notably, refugee households frequently enroll in education and skills training despite their economic self-sufficiency status (Triplett and Vilter 2020) and so those who are economically self-sufficient have an advantage over those who do not.

We can analyze the relationship between economic self-sufficiency and obtaining a job quickly. This would indicate how the efforts of the United States government and partner agencies contribute to their stated goals. This leads to *Hypothesis 1: Obtaining a job quickly should be associated with economic self-sufficiency.*

*Economic integration: theory*

*The blank slate hypothesis.* Researchers frequently find that refugees are “blank slates”, that their individual characteristics do not translate into assimilation (Gold 1991). Tran and Lara-Garcia find that “Refugees may not be premigration blank slates, but their context of reception on arrival in the United States effectively renders them so, at least in the short term.” (2020:142). The blank slate hypothesis holds that pre-migration factors such as working a certain job, English proficiency, or education level would not predict better economic self-sufficiency outcomes. This runs against new assimilation theory.

Embracing the blank slate hypothesis does not mean giving up on explaining refugee outcomes but shifts the focus on host-context characteristics and interactions. Phillimore (2020) summarizes the post-migration host-context with five assimilation opportunity structures. The physical location, called locality are the opportunities such as employment prospects, housing capacity, and available healthcare. When these are absent in a particular locality, will disadvantage assimilation compared to better-equipped locations. How the host context discusses refugees through media and political discourse affects the integration of refugees. For example, Cuban migrants in the 1960’s were seen as refugees fleeing a communist state and consequently Americans had better views about these migrants. Many researchers hypothesized that this difference in attitudes contributed to the successful outcomes of Cubans compared to other similar groups such as Haitians (Phillimore 2020; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou 1997). Similarly, the “relations” opportunity structure reflects the relationships that refugees have after arrival with host context members and organizations. When a location inhibits refugees, this stratifies outcomes. For example, burdensome requirements a driver’s license or racism can frustrate refugee assimilation (Phillimore 2020; Strang and Ager 2010). Lastly, the support offered to refugees impacts outcomes. Refugees who receive more benefits at the beginning of their arrival may have better outcomes that those who receive most of their support benefits after a period of struggling (Hobfoll 1989; Hobfoll et al. 2018; Strang and Ager 2010; United States Office of Refugee Resettlement 2021).

Focusing on post-resettlement factors contrasts with sociology of immigration theories such as new assimilation theory. To assess the impact of contexts, I test *Hypothesis 2: Pre/post-resettlement contexts such as area of resettlement, country of origin, employment sector, and enrollment in training programs after resettlement should influence economic self-sufficiency.*

*New assimilation theory.* New assimilation theory is a repackaging of earlier assimilation concepts (Alba and Nee 1997). Here, assimilation is defined by achieving parity with societal averages. Consequently, assimilation can be in many outcomes, not just cultural assimilation. For this project, I examine self-sufficiency. Assimilation is not necessarily inevitable nor irreversible. It is not necessarily an individual changing to suit a host context, though it often is. For example, when individuals share their food cultures when they resettle, American food culture itself can change.

Assimilation occurs gradually and assimilating in one area enables assimilation in other areas. Strang and Ager (2010), from the refugee studies literature, use assimilation in employment and language to illustrate this phenomenon. When refugees obtain jobs, they encounter more natives and consequently better their English. More English proficiency can lead to better jobs that provide more resources. These resources could enable training, including formal English training, a common strategy among refugees (Triplett and Vilter 2020).

Similarly to this feedback loop between assimilation outcomes is the feedback loop between having more resources, broadly defined but especially human capital such as English proficiency, education, and skills earned in the labor market should result in migrants using those resources to improve their resettlement outcomes (Alba and Nee 1997; Donato and Ferris 2020; Feliciano and Lanuza 2017; Hobfoll et al. 2018; Portes and Zhou 1993; Strang and Ager 2010; Tran and Lara-García 2020). Human capital is one of the central foci of this project because while both the sociology of immigration and research supporting the blank slate hypothesis recognize the importance of human capital, they make conflicting predictions about whether pre- or post- resettlement human capital will significantly affect outcomes.

This leads to *Hypothesis 3: Measures of pre/post- resettlement human capital such as education, English proficiency, and work history should predict better economic self-sufficiency.* Null findings would support the blank slate hypothesis, while significant pre-resettlement findings would support new assimilation. Significant post-resettlement human capital variables support both hypotheses, though according to the blank slate hypothesis refugees may be rendered as blank slates for some time before their human capital begins to benefit them.

Some researchers call for more attention to be paid to the pre/post- resettlement contexts. This is a different focus than the sociology of immigration’s inclusion of pre-migration individual characteristics. The blank slate hypothesis, frequently referenced in refugee studies (Gold 1991; Tran and Lara-García 2020), holds that post-migration host-context characteristics are the central drivers of assimilation for refugees. Similarly but more moderately, Phillimore (2020) encourages researchers to focus on context factors. In contrast, the sociology of migration predicts varying outcomes based on pre-migration factors and post-migration factors. This incongruence leads to *Hypothesis 4: Context-level variables should be stronger predictors of economic self-sufficiency than human capital variables.*

METHODS

*Data*

The Annual Survey of Refugees is a yearly survey run by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. After 1993 it includes a representative sample of all recently arrived refugee groups in the United States. The Annual Survey of Refugees is the only publicly available dataset representing refugees arrived in the United States during the past five years. The sampling frame is the refugee entry records provided by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. The 2016-2019 data surveys about 1500 households each year. They obtain a response rate that fluctuates around 20- 25%. I use the included household level weights. The survey is available in 16 languages including English and thus covers about 75% of the incoming refugee population in any given year.

*Dependent variable*

The Annual Survey of Refugees asks refugees a series of questions about their public assistance usage. Heads of households report whether they or anyone in their household has used the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Refugee Cash Assistance, General Assistance, Social Security Income, public housing, or miscellaneous cash assistance from their sponsor/sponsor agency, religious group, or charitable organization in the past 12 months. I dichotomize this to indicate when a household is living independently of public assistance programs or uses at least one of them at the time they are surveyed.

*P**re/post-migration human capital variables*

I include years of education as a continuous variable ranging from 0 years and capped at 20 years.

Also included are dichotomous pre-resettlement enrollment in English or employment training program variables. Pre-resettlement English proficiency is estimated by the respondent at the time of interview on a four item Likert scale:1-Very well and 4- Not at all. I reverse code this variable in the modeling.

Post-migration variables included present enrollment in English or employment training programs are dichotomized (enrolled/not enrolled). I test present enrollment in English or training programs as a context variable because the presence, quality, and accessibility of the training programs are controlled by the context, though there are contrary arguments. Because both the blank slate hypothesis and new assimilation theory posit that post-migration human capital will affect outcomes, the distinction between post-resettlement variables is less important.

I combine the different work environments refugees occupy in the United States into four categories: service, blue collar, professional/health/education/social services, and general logistics: maintenance, transport, general products, and goods. I run the work sector variables as context variables as well when I assess their relative importance.

*P**re/post-migration context-level variables*

Information is available on the pre-resettlement occupation, and I collapse these occupations into four sectors—professional, sales, service, or blue collar. This differs from the work environments in the previous section because for refugees the distribution of work environments is different upon arrival to the U.S. For example, few refugees work in sales in the United States, and many more work general logistics type jobs in the U.S. than did these jobs before resettlement. National origin is collected where possible and as mentioned earlier, when this data is not available, I use country of citizenship or ethnicity to approximate sending-context. U.S. census region of resettlement is listed as either Northeast, South, West, or Midwest. I track the year the survey takes place so I can control for changes between 2016-2018, again by comparing them together. The post-migration context changes a good deal during this time. For example, the Trump Muslim travel ban was implemented in 2017.

*Demographic and control variables*

I include several demographic variables to capture key differences across refugees. Age is measured using six ordinal intervals: 0-17, 18-24, 25-39, 40-54, and 55 or older. The censuring here likely attenuates the effects of age, though most refugees come to the U.S. early in life. Sex is dichotomous male/female. Number of people in the household is capped at 5. I include the total number of household members that “…(Have any) condition that has lasted for 6 or more months” which prevented them from working a job or prevented them from working at certain kinds of jobs, ranging from 0-5. Marital status is collapsed for simplicity as married, divorced/legally separated/widowed, never married, and child (i.e respondent is younger than 18), or other.

To account for the theorized causal relationships among other assimilation outcomes (Strang and Ager 2008), I include two other forms of economic assimilation that are relevant to economic self-sufficiency. The Annual Survey of Refugees provides the household’s year of arrival and I subtract this from the year of the survey to make an arrival year variable. I then use this to calculate a “time to first job” variable by subtracting year of first job from year of arrival. Weekly working hours is a continuous variable that ranges from 0-96 hours in the past week before being interviewed.

## *Analytical strategy*

I use logit models to analyze economic self-sufficiency. The coefficients of logit models with different variables are not comparable, however the statistical significance is comparable. To examine Hypothesis 4, which compares human capital versus context effects in predicting economic integration. I run models with only human capital or only contexts to discern the relative importance of human capital and contexts.

There are methods of assessing the relative fit of variables in non-nested models. I use the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) to compare a model that only includes demographic/control variables and human capital to a demographic/control variables and context variables only model. AIC and BIC are interpreted similarly. A lower information criterion indicates greater efficiency of the independent variables in predicting the dependent variable. A key limitation to this method is the lack of hypothesis testing with confidence intervals; in other words, there is no way of knowing if the differences observed would likely be seen in a different sample.

To make comparisons between my findings and the findings of Tran and Lara-Garcia’s (2020) study also using the Annual Survey of Refugees, I use multiple imputation to address missing data with the MICE (Multivariate Imputation via Chained Equations) package in R. The imputation process uses predictive mean matching for continuous variables, logistic regression for dichotomous variables, proportional odds model for ordinal variables, and multinomial logistic regression for categorical variables. The predictors used in the imputation equation will be the variables included in the analytical models that have a correlation larger than .1, but I excluded each individual public assistance program variable (they are colinear), time to job/job sector (because these are created by values in the dataset), country of birth (there are too many levels to be helpful in imputation), and marriage status (there are too many levels to be helpful). I weight the data according to the household level weights provided with each year of the Annual Survey of Refugees (Triplett and Vilter 2020). I use 21 imputations for each model.

Multiple imputation usually increases the efficiency of the estimation, but if done incorrectly can be a source of error. Multiple imputation does not substantially change the estimates from unimputed data, but models missing data better than listwise deletion. Thus multiple imputation are the models presented here.

Code and data for the entire process is available at (BLINDED).

*Descriptive statistics*

An important take away from the descriptive statistics is the reported pre-resettlement work histories of 2018 and 2019. For these years, most respondents are coded as having an “other” work history. Perhaps this reflects the realities of these refugee groups or measurement error. The reason for these anomalous findings is irrelevant, the outcome is that this variable is not a great source of information. I use the “other” category as the reference when reporting for this variable, effectively comparing those who specify their work history with those who reply “other” and most of the sample in 2018 and 2019. This limitation should be considered when interpreting this variable’s results.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| TABLE 1.Descriptive Statistics from the Annual Survey of Refugees (2016-2019) | | | | | |
|  | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2016-2019 |
| ***Economic Integration*** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Obtaining a Job in One Year | 77.2% | 79.1% | 79.9% | 76.4% | 78.1% |
| Economic Self-sufficiency | 27.8% | 27.8% | 29.1% | 36.6% | 30.3% |
| Last week’s working hours (Range: 0-96) | 37.9 (12.7) | 38. (13.1) | 39.0 (13.6) | 37.0 (12.9) | 38.0 (13.1) |
| ***Key Independent Variables*** |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Pre-Resettlement Human Capital* |  |  |  |  |  |
| Years of Education | 10.1 (5.0) | 10.0 (5.0) | 10.0 (5.0) | 9.8 (4.9) | 10.0 (5.0) |
| Pre-Resettlement Work Sector |  |  |  |  |  |
| Professional | 27.1% | 23.9% | 1.8% | 0% | 13.3% |
| Sales | 9.1% | 10.4% | 0.9% | 0% | 5.2% |
| Service | 21.8% | 23.6% | 1.1% | 0% | 11.8% |
| Blue Collar | 19.9% | 20.3% | 0.7% | 0% | 10.3% |
| Student | 10.7% | 12.9% | 0% | 0% | 6.0% |
| Other | 10.8% | 8.9% | 95.4% | 97.4% | 53.3% |
| None | 0.7% | 0.2% | 0% | 0% | 0.2% |
| English Proficiency at arrival |  |  |  |  |  |
| Not at All | 37.3% | 37.6% | 47.3% | 55.2% | 44.3% |
| Not Well | 37.4% | 36.9% | 33% | 30.0% | 34.3% |
| Well | 21.6% | 20.4% | 17.1% | 12.3% | 17.8% |
| Very Well | 3.7% | 5.1% | 2.6% | 2.5% | 3.5% |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Context Effects* |  |  |  |  |  |
| Region of resettlement |  |  |  |  |  |
| South | 31.5% | 16.3% | 30.6% | 28.8% | 26.1% |
| Northeast | 15.9% | 14.2% | 16.9% | 18.3% | 15.7% |
| Midwest | 28.2% | 29.5% | 29.3% | 26.3% | 29% |
| West | 24.4% | 40% | 23.1% | 26.6% | 29.2% |
| National Origin |  |  |  |  |  |
| Afghanistan | 0% | 0% | 0% | 2.8% | .7% |
| Bhutan | 16.3% | 8.6% | 9.1% | 10.0% | 9.1% |
| Burma | 16.3% | 13.3% | 9.7% | 9.7% | 12.7% |
| Cuba | 7.9% | 5.4% | 0% | 3.3% | 6.1% |
| Colombia | 0% | 2.0% | 0% | 0% | .5% |
| DR Congo | 4.1% | 6.4% | 6.8% | 13.2% | 7.1% |
| El Salvador | 0% | 0% | 1.9% | 6.8% | 1.8% |
| Eritrea | 0% | 0% | 3.8% | 0% | 1.3% |
| Ethiopia | 0% | 1.2% | 0% | 0% | .3% |
| Iran | 4.9% | 6.5% | 5.0% | 4.1% | 12.0% |
| Iraq | 32.0% | 31.7% | 30.6% | 15.9% | 23.1% |
| Nepal | .5% | .8% | 1.1% | 1.0% | .6% |
| Somalia | 7.4% | 11.0% | 9.7% | 4.5% | 8.5% |
| Syria | 0% | 4.4% | 9.9% | 8.0% | 3.2% |
| Thailand | .6% | .7% | .9% | 0% | .3% |
| Ukraine | 0% | 0% | 2.1% | 7.5% | 1.9% |
| Other | 9.9% | 7.9% | 11.6% | 13.2% | 15.4% |
| *Post-Resettlement Human Capital* |  |  |  |  |  |
| Current enrollment in English Training programs | 26.9% | 31.8% | 29.5% | 33.1% | 30.3% |
| Current enrollment in Employment Training programs | 14.6% | 15.7% | 15.0% | 13.2% | 15.1% |
| English Proficiency now |  |  |  |  |  |
| Not at All | 14.9% | 14.2% | 13.4% | 16.8% | 14.8% |
| Not Well | 31.6% | 29.5% | 36.1% | 41.5% | 34.7% |
| Well | 37.9% | 39.4% | 36.8% | 30.3% | 36.1% |
| Very Well | 15.5% | 16.8% | 13.8% | 11.4% | 14.4% |
| Post-Resettlement Employment |  |  |  |  |  |
| None | .2% | 1.5% | .2% | 1.6% | .9% |
| Blue Collar | 25.4% | 26.5% | 28.0% | 24.3% | 26.1% |
| Retail | 40.1% | 37.1% | 35.7% | 32.5% | 36.3% |
| Professional/Ed/Health | 7.2% | 6.1% | 5.5% | 7.8% | 6.7% |
| General Logistics | 19.6% | 21.0% | 22.5% | 26.0% | 22.3% |
| Other | 7.5% | 7.7% | 8.1% | 7.8% | 7.8% |
| *Control Variables* |  |  |  |  |  |
| When Arrived |  |  |  |  |  |
| Sex: Male | 72.8% | 66.1% | 68.2% | 58.1% | 66.3% |
| Age | 39.7 (12.7) | 39.2 (12.4) | 39.5 (12.4) | 39.5 (13.1) | 39.7 (12.6) |
| How many people in Household? | 3.2 (1.5) | 3.3 (1.5) | 3.5 (1.5) | 3.3 (1.5) | 3.3 (1.5) |
| Marital Status |  |  |  |  |  |
| Married | 64.4% | 61.8% | 65.2% | 56.5% | 62.0% |
| Divorced/Separated/Widowed | 10.1% | 12.6% | 11.9% | 13.4% | 12.0% |
| Never Married | 24.3% | 24.8% | 21.3% | 23.8% | 23.5% |
| Other | 1.1% | 0.9% | 1.5% | 6.4% | 2.5% |
| Number of Dependents | .5 (.7) | .5 (.7) | .5 (.7) | .4 (.7) | .5 (.7) |
| Number of Kids | .7 (1) | .8 (1) | .9 (1.1) | .7 (1) | .8 (1.1) |
| Total n (Households) | 1500 | 1515 | 1514 | 1506 | 6035 |

*The economic self-sufficiency models*

I report the results of the modeling below in Table 2 using odds ratios (OR) for convenience and interpretability. Odds ratios are the probability of an event happening divided by the probability of an event not happening. An odds ratio higher than 1 indicates greater probability of economic self-sufficiency, while an odds ratio lower than 1 indicates fewer odds of being economically self-sufficient. Odds ratios follow an exponential scale which becomes more severe at the ends of the range. In other words, the .01 difference between .99 and 1 is a smaller gap than between .02 and .03.

*Demographic/control variables.* Overall, the basic model shows that years in the U.S. and basic demographic factors are important predictors of economic self-sufficiency.

We see statistically significant effects for the duration of time a household has been in the United States, p<.001. This is a moderate effect, showing an average 20% reduction in odds of self-sufficiency for every additional year residing in the United States. Those who have been in the U.S. longer have lower odds of being self-sufficient. This may seem odd, but descriptive statistics grouped by year of arrival find the same pattern. This could reflect a tendency for households to change employment and/or housing situations with longer residencies.

Several control variables indicated decreased odds of a household being self-sufficient. The results indicated that households with older heads of the house struggle slightly (p<.001, OR~ .97) to be economically self-sufficient. Larger households had significantly lower odds of economic self-sufficiency, this was the second strongest predictor among the demographic/control variables. Additionally, households with members who could not work suffered a large reduction in odds of being economically self-sufficient. It is important to note this effect is cumulative, this penalty can be experienced multiple times by having more than one household member who cannot work.

The demographic variables illustrate important patterns. The household with the highest odds of economic self-sufficiency would be recently arrived, no dependent members, and in fact, the fewer members of any kind the better.

*Pre-resettlement context variables.* The second model adds pre-context factors and shows differences in economic self-sufficiency across birth country. There are four key groupings. First, many countries have similar rates to Iraqis. Iraqi, Syrian, Thai, and Bhutanese households have overlapping confidence intervals, as noted by their insignificant p-values. A second privileged group consists of Burmese, Iranian and DR Congolese households. These households had much higher odds of economic self-sufficiency than Iraqi-similar ones. El Salvadorian and Ukrainian households did not have many cases and so their results are likely not typical or trustworthy. Finally, Somalian households alone had significantly worse odds of economic self-sufficiency than Iraqi households. Somalian households had 77% reduced odds of being economically self-sufficient. This is the largest disadvantage in the model. It is unlikely that the macro, race-centered context of the U.S. advantages DR Congolese while disadvantaging Somalians. Instead, these outcomes are likely obtained at the micro-level. Differing odds from being from a different country (without stratification based on host-context preferences) supports new assimilation theory and is evidence against the blank slate hypothesis.

The Somalian household findings can be analyzed by comparing Somalia against other countries. First, the Somalian results are paralleled by earlier work highlighting their tendency to work for low wages (Chambers 2017). Chambers (2017) illustrates a likely causal mechanism: working for lower wages makes it hard to live in the United States without supplementing those wages. Somalians also inhabit a unique space as both Africans and primarily Islamic households, though there is no mechanism suggested by these results for how being black and Islamic would affect their odds of economic self-sufficiency compared to other non-white Islamic households.

*Pre-resettlement human capital.* Among pre-resettlement human capital variables, only resettling with very good English contributed to predicting economic self-sufficiency in the full model. New assimilation theory predicted Education would be a powerful predictor, but I found no evidence of that. Putting the question of significance aside, the effect of education, even if it were significant, would be very small indeed. The average household would multiply this very small effect by only ten years of education to obtain their predicted probabilities. This finding is robust to criticisms of only sampling a limited range of education outcomes; the standard deviation of the complete sample is 5 years.

Blue collar work was the only pre-resettlement work history with a significant advantage, though a professional history was nearly significant. This is evidence for the importance of human capital, though there are significant limitations. Recall the 2018 and 2019 samples have almost no variation for this variable. Did this affect the estimates? I ran each year’s data individually (tables are available in Appendix A) and found no significant effects of pre-resettlement job sector associating with economic self-sufficiency in models for 2016 or 2017. In the 2016 model, those with a pre-resettlement history as only students were more likely to be self-sufficient, though this could be for a myriad of reasons and does not continue in 2017. In conclusion, we saw some mild differentiation from having a blue-collar work history. This is weak evidence against the blank slate hypothesis.

*Post-resettlement context.* Overall, the post-migration context models show that region of settlement and survey year predict economic self-sufficiency. Refugees resettled to the Southern region of the United States had higher odds of being economically self-sufficient (p<.05, OR ~ 1.39) this is a moderate effect, indicating 39% greater odds of being economically self-sufficient than households being resettled to the west.

The year the survey is administered controls for aggregate context effects through 2016-2019, years during which the Trump administration settled into its power. These effects were positively associated with economic self-sufficiency in every model. This is a positive contributor to the odds of economic self-sufficiency and a meaningfully moderate relationship. Note I also ran a supplementary analysis considering survey year as a factor and 2016 as the reference, and a this revealed a linear progression for each subsequent survey year.

Adding in the post-settlement context effects did not change the AIC/BIC very much compared to adding the other variable groups. This indicates much of the pre-resettlement explanatory power can also be explained with post-resettlement context variables. This similarity in power rejects the blank slate hypothesis. However, because both the sociology of immigration and refugee studies perspectives agree that post-resettlement context variables should predict assimilation, the effects of post-resettlement context variables themselves are only of concern to hypothesis 1 and it’s focus on rapid employment.

*Post-resettlement human capital and other measures of economic integration.* Being enrolled in an English training program reduced the odds of economic self-sufficiency (p< .001, OR =.63). This is a highly significant, substantial reduction in the odds of economic self-sufficiency. It is very possible that those who attend English training do so in lieu of a job or receive other assistance from the organization that provides English training. Being enrolled in an employment training program did not predict economic self-sufficiency, nor did English proficiency at the time of being surveyed (p>.1). Because pre-resettlement and post-resettlement English proficiency are the same variable measured at two points in time, their effects are strongly correlated (.74). The effect of English proficiency could be spread out between the two variables. In other words, post-resettlement English proficiency probably has strong effects on the odds of economic self-sufficiency and pre-resettlement English proficiency likely summarizes much of this effect.

The only post-resettlement context that impacted the odds of a household being economically self-sufficient was obtaining a job in the retail/sales category. These jobs were associated with a modest reduction in the odds of being economically self-sufficient. This indicates that these jobs, on average, likely do not provide the resources the other job categories do.

Both measures of economic integration had interesting results. Refugee households that had more working hours had higher odds of being economically self-sufficient (p<.001, OR= 1.02). This is highly significant. The size of the relationship is moderate because the estimate is multiplied against every working hour and the average is close to 40 hours. In contrast to the federal government and resettlement offices’ focus on obtaining a job quickly, refugees who waited longer to obtain their jobs had the same odds as those who obtained their jobs sooner. This finding should be interpreted in tandem with the finding of longer U.S. residency leading to lower odds of economic self-sufficiency, not higher. This hints that finding a job is not necessarily the hard part, but finding a job that is a good long term fit and provides enough income is difficult. If most households found jobs that paid enough money and were stable, we would expect to see positive coefficients for residency in the U.S. and how quickly a refugee was able to find a job.

Adding the post-resettlement human capital reduced the AIC by nearly 1000 points. This is the second largest reduction, behind the addition of pre-context variables. The fact that adding the pre-resettlement capital variables reduced the AIC by nearly 1500 points indicates that this group of variables is very useful in predicting economic self-sufficiency. This is evidence against the blank slate hypothesis.

*Comparing the relative importance of human capital and context effects.* In a separate analysis comparing a human capital only model to a context only model, I found context variables to be better for predicting economic self-sufficiency. The AIC and the BIC favored the contexts variables model (AIC=4602, BIC=4780) over the human capital variables model (AIC=6012, BIC=6127). The results of this test, in other words, are if you need to predict household economic self-sufficiency with only one group of variables, the context variables are better predictors. This supports following the recommendations of Phillimore (2020). However, as seen in the main model, both human capital and context effects were significant predictors.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| TABLE 2. Odds Ratios of Obtaining Economic Self-Sufficiency Within Five Years with Pooled Data (2016-2019) | | | | | |
|  | Basic | Pre-Context | Post-Context | Pre-Capital | Full |
| Years in U.S. | 0.93\*\*\* | 0.88\*\*\* | 0.81\*\*\* | 0.81\*\*\* | 0.80\*\*\* |
| Female (ref=Male) | 1.18\* | 1.18 | 1.12 | 1.05 | 1.19 |
| Age | 0.98\*\*\* | 0.98\*\*\* | 0.98\*\*\* | 0.97\*\*\* | 0.99 |
| Size of Household | 0.71\*\*\* | 0.68\*\*\* | 0.68\*\*\* | 0.61\*\*\* | 0.54\*\*\* |
| Union Status (ref=Married) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Divorced/Widowed | 0.63\*\*\* | 0.62\*\* | 0.61\*\* | 0.68\* | 0.86 |
| Never Married | 1.23\* | 1.14 | 1.2 | 1.17 | 1.32~ |
| Other Marital Status | 1.36 | 1.56 | 1.39 | 1.16 | 0.92 |
| Dependents in the Household | 0.41\*\*\* | 0.43\*\*\* | 0.43\*\*\* | 0.48\*\*\* | 0.55\*\*\* |
| Children in the Household | 0.80\*\*\* | 0.81\*\*\* | 0.81\*\*\* | 0.87\* | 0.94 |
| Birth Country (ref=Iraq) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Cuba |  | 2.13\*\* | 1.9\*\* | 2.49\*\*\* | 1.61 |
| Bhutan |  | 0.91 | 0.9 | 1.19 | 1.09 |
| Burma/Myanmar |  | 1.54\*\* | 1.51\*\* | 2\*\*\* | 1.45~ |
| DR Congo |  | 1.66\*\* | 1.64\*\* | 1.9\*\* | 1.67\* |
| Iran |  | 2.44\*\*\* | 2.49\*\*\* | 2.73\*\*\* | 1.98\* |
| Somalia |  | 0.37\*\*\* | 0.36\*\*\* | 0.42\*\*\* | 0.33\*\*\* |
| Syria |  | 0.73 | 0.68 | 0.83 | 0.99 |
| Thailand |  | 0.46 | 0.51 | 0.62 | 0.88 |
| Ukraine |  | 1.47 | 1.38 | 1.77 | 1.77 |
| El Salvador |  | 4.15\*\*\* | 3.52\*\*\* | 4.58\*\*\* | 8.27\*\*\* |
| Other |  | 1.08 | 1.11 |  |  |
| Job History (ref=Other) |  |  |  |  |  |
| None |  | 0.11~ | 0.21 | 0.78 | 3.58 |
| Professional |  | 0.84 | 1.7\*\* | 1.34 | 1.55~ |
| Sales |  | 0.44\*\*\* | 0.92 | 0.84 | 1.18 |
| Service |  | 0.62\*\* | 1.2 | 1.12 | 1.31 |
| Blue collar |  | 0.79~ | 1.57\* | 1.37 | 1.59\* |
| Student |  | 0.86 | 1.68\* | 1.44 | 2.56 |
| Resettlement Area (ref=West) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Northeast |  |  | 0.9 | 0.92 | 1.03 |
| South |  |  | 1.36\*\* | 1.33\* | 1.39\* |
| Midwest |  |  | 1.1 | 1.2 | 1.25 |
| Year of the Survey |  |  | 1.57\*\*\* | 1.54\*\*\* | 1.54\*\*\* |
| Years of Education |  |  |  | 1.03~ | 1.03 |
| Pre-English (ref=Not At All) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Not Well |  |  |  | 0.96 | 0.93 |
| Well |  |  |  | 1.09 | 1.02 |
| Very Well |  |  |  | 2.46\*\* | 2.3\* |
| In English Training Program |  |  |  |  | 0.63\*\*\* |
| In Job Training Program |  |  |  |  | 1.21 |
| Post-English (ref=Not At All) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Not Well |  |  |  |  | 0.63~ |
| Well |  |  |  |  | 0.68 |
| Very Well |  |  |  |  | 0.73 |
| Current Job (ref=Blue Collar) |  |  |  |  |  |
| None |  |  |  |  | 4.14 |
| Retail/Sales |  |  |  |  | 0.72\* |
| Professional/ED/Health |  |  |  |  | 1.12 |
| General Support |  |  |  |  | 0.94 |
| Other |  |  |  |  | 0.77 |
| Time until First Job in Years |  |  |  |  | 0.91 |
| Weekly Working Hours |  |  |  |  | 1.02\*\*\* |
| AIC/BIC | 6383/6445 | 4686/4843 | 4602/4780 | 3788/3978 | 2709/2960 |
| NOTE: \*\*\* for p=<0.001, \*\* for p=<0.01, \* for p=<0.05, ~ for p=<0.1  Estimates account for the complex sampling for the Annual Survey of Refugees. Data was imputed using the MICE package in r, number of imputations =21. Variables may be dropped after initial introduction to prevent collinearity. Imputed n for all models = 6,025 | | | | | |

DISCUSSION

This study had four main research questions:1) Does obtaining employment quickly predict self-sufficiency? 2) How do pre/post- migration human capital affect refugee economic self-sufficiency in the U.S.? 3) How do pre/post- migration context factors (e.g., national identity or region of resettlement) shape economic self-sufficiency? 4) What is the relative importance of human capital and context factors in shaping refugee economic self-sufficiency?

Despite the emphasis of the Office of Refugee Resettlement and the Population, Refugee, and Migration Bureau of the State Department on rapid employment, refugees who waited longer to find a job were as likely to be economically self-sufficient as those who got jobs quickly. I also found that households with longer residencies in the U.S. were less likely to be economically self-sufficient.

There is some evidence from the employee/occupation mismatch literature to suggest that those who are under a lot of pressure may obtain jobs that are not optimal in the long run (Minicozzi 2005). Research done with college students who are under pressure from large school loans indicates the vulnerability from large loans encourages them to obtain jobs that are not optimal— for them nor the economy. It is possible that refugees’ vulnerable position and outside pressure have similar outcomes (Ng and Johnson 2020).

Economic self-sufficiency was predicted by human capital and resettlement contexts. However, neither contexts nor human capital performed completely as expected by either the blank slate hypothesis or assimilation theories. That is, I found mixed evidence for hypothesis 2 and hypothesis 3. This is slightly different than what other researchers who use the Annual Survey of Refugees (Tran and Lara-Garcia 2020), because they generally found no or sporadic pre-resettlement effects. However, my findings echo their findings: variables we thought of as being important were not, such as education and finding a job quickly. In conclusion it appears researchers should use both and be prepared for strange findings. How can we predict situations where theoretically important variables will be good predictors or fail to make their predicted impacts?

The mechanisms behind why many households are unable to leverage some of their pre-resettlement experiences is unknown. Perhaps employers disregard foreign credentials or households struggle to translate their skills to others if they lack mastery of the local language. This work provides some evidence for the latter line of conjecture. Only the most proficient English speakers had increased odds of economic self-sufficiency. Is English learning disadvantage a necessary struggle period upon arrival to the U.S or are households more successful with informal proficiency as they participate in American society?

This work illustrates characteristics for struggling refugee households. Those with dependents who cannot work, large households generally, and those enrolled in English training programs will probably need more help than other households. Somalians were the most disadvantaged country of origin. Retail and sales jobs decreased the odds of being economically self-sufficient.

Refugee households that arrived in 2016 or 2017 had worse outcomes than those arriving in 2018 or 2019. This may be for several reasons. American resettlement lost some resettlement capacity in 2017 due to rule changes that affected funding (Mathema and Carratala 2020). Resettlement agencies had to cut programs, close offices, and shut down any center that did not resettle more than a hundred refugees in fiscal year 2016. This may have affected the experiences of households resettled after 2017. The substantial improvement seen in the model for later years may indicate adaptation by resettlement agencies to a new structure. However, agencies were already paid before the rule change for those resettled in 2011-2017 and so these outcomes should be better than those recently arrived under the new system if the new system affected individual outcomes. Thus, I favor the explanation that refugees do not have enough resources to navigate the transition from using automatic assistance provided to refugees to independence and this struggle worsens throughout their stay.

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited by its focus on recently arrived refugees. Because of this, the trajectories of refugees after the first five years cannot be analyzed here. It is possible that some variables—especially post-resettlement context and human capital variables—take longer to manifest their benefits than the survey window provides. I cannot account for differences in income requirements for public assistance programs, cultural differences beyond what is aggregated by the census region or analyze the nuanced micro-level interactions between incoming refugees and local communities. Another important limitation is the lack of the month a refugee arrived and the month when a refugee found a job. This censuring is limiting because most refugees find a job quickly. There is no local job market context variable available in the data and so this important context was not able to be analyzed. While there is good reason to assume that there are Trump presidency effects captured by this measure, it also measures the sum of everything happening in the United States at the time. The pre-resettlement work history variable is limited by a smaller effective sampling than other variables. It essentially only records work histories for 2016-2017 and compares them to the “other” categories for those years and then the entire 2018 and 2019 samples.

CONCLUSION

Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to the literature on refugee economic integration and has important policy implications. I found a few specific areas where the blank slate hypothesis seemed to hold true (education, some levels of English proficiency, and many work histories), but mostly found exceptions to this assumption which is frequently made in refugee studies (Gold 1992; Tran and Lara-Garcia 2020). This work mostly supported assimilation theorists.

I provide evidence supporting the work of economic researchers concerned about the priorities of the resettlement system (Capps et al. 2015; Mathema and Carratala 2020). Encouraging refugees to get a job as soon as possible did not help them become economically self-sufficient. Those who were in the United States for longer amounts of time were less likely to be economically self-sufficient. This is a decisive double blow for centering rapid employment: we see no effect (the estimate without a confidence interval is negative) for rapid employment and those resettled under this centering do not have better outcomes as their residency grows. Contrarily, they have worse outcomes.

This study raises questions because on the one hand, some results strongly support the predictions made by new assimilation theory (Alba and Nee 1997) and segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993). On the other hand, theoretically-favored predictors like years of education were not significant predictors, which strongly supports the blank slate hypothesis. This may indicate large standard errors or ignorance of the processes that affect economic integration for refugees. Refugees may not be blank slates, but sometimes for reasons unknown and at least in the short term, theoretically important human capital and context predictors do not predict economic self-sufficiency. Why only certain predictors are important and how to predict which ones will be significant a priori is an interesting puzzle.

These results encourage both refugees and the contexts they inhabit to maximize the potential of incoming refugees by utilizing their backgrounds, growing their skills, and assisting them translate their skills into the American context. By pursuing factors that predict economic assimilation, we increase the tax revenues of host countries like the United States, reduce the tax burden for public assistance programs, and identify contextual characteristics that can be the targets of interventions to assist refugees in translating their skills and talents for the betterment of the communities in which they become citizens.

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APPENDIX

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| TABLE A1. Complete Logit Models for Each Survey Year in the Annual Survey of Refugees | | | |  |
| *Variables* | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
| Years in U.S. | 0.83\* | 0.66\*\*\* | 0.80~ | 0.92 |
| Female (ref=Male) | 1.64 | 0.87 | 1.82 | 0.95 |
| Age | 1.01 | 0.99 | 1.00 | 0.98 |
| Size of Household | 0.45\*\*\* | 0.47\*\*\* | 0.48\*\*\* | 0.73\*\*\* |
| Union Status (ref=Married) |  |  |  |  |
| Divorced/Widowed | 1.66 | 0.65 | 0.54 | 0.70 |
| Never Married | 1.63 | 1.06 | 0.93 | 1.75~ |
| Other Marital Status | 0.33 | 0.80 | 0.00\*\*\* | 1.48 |
| Dependents in the Household | 0.43\*\*\* | 0.77 | 0.56\* | 0.26\*\*\* |
| Children in the Household | 1.26 | 0.91 | 0.80 | 0.68\* |
| Birth Country (ref=Iraq) |  |  |  |  |
| Cuba | 0.24\* | 7.13 | 1.00 | 0.09\*\* |
| Bhutan | 0.37~ | 4.09\*\* | 4.20 | 0.06\*\* |
| Burma/Myanmar | 0.09\*\* | 5.83\* | 2.35\* | 0.22~ |
| DR Congo | 0.64 | 8.17\*\* | 2.29 | 0.65 |
| Iran | 0.26\* | 2.82 | 2.09 | 0.10\*\* |
| Somalia | 0.07\*\*\* | 2.44 | 0.03\*\*\* | 0.05\*\* |
| Syria |  | 6.16\* | 2.80 | 0.06\*\* |
| Thailand | 0.44 | 3.12 | 5.59 |  |
| Ukraine |  |  |  | 0.34 |
| El Salvador |  |  | 23.12\*\* | 0.53 |
| Other |  |  |  |  |
| Job History (ref=Other) |  |  |  |  |
| None | 3.52 |  |  |  |
| Professional | 1.29 | 1.07 |  |  |
| Sales | 0.42 | 1.02 |  |  |
| Service | 0.97 | 1.09 |  |  |
| Blue collar | 1.77 | 1.39 |  |  |
| Student | 3.77\* | 1.55 |  |  |
| Resettlement Area (ref=West) |  |  |  |  |
| Northeast | 1.91 | 0.90 | 0.60 | 1.41 |
| South | 1.62 | 1.33 | 2.30\* | 1.68 |
| Midwest | 1.46 | 0.99 | 1.59 | 2.31\* |
| Years of Education | 1.06 | 1.01 | 1.03 | 1.04 |
| Pre-English (ref=Not At All) |  |  |  |  |
| Not Well | 1.22 | 0.78 | 0.98 | 0.68 |
| Well | 1.21 | 0.52 | 1.06 | 1.02 |
| Very Well | 1.51 | 1.20 | 6.42 | 2.49 |
| In English Training Program | 0.45 | 0.68 | 0.68 | 0.57~ |
| In Job Training Program | 1.52\* | 1.62 | 1.11 | 0.81 |
| Post-English (ref=Not At All) |  |  |  |  |
| Not Well | 0.97 | 0.52 | 1.15 | 0.39\* |
| Well | 0.74 | 0.66 | 0.78 | 0.90 |
| Very Well | 1.05 | 0.56 | 1.02\* | 0.64 |
| Current Job (ref=Blue Collar) |  |  |  |  |
| None |  |  |  | 5.30~ |
| Retail/Sales | 0.46\*\* | 0.74 | 1.23 | 0.67 |
| Professional/ED/Health | 1.07 | 2.48 | 0.73 | 1.12 |
| General Support | 0.50\* | 0.98 | 0.95 | 1.80~ |
| Other | 0.51 | 0.59 | 1.27 | 1.21 |
| Time until First Job in Years | 1.14 | 0.77 | 0.55\*\* | 1.26 |
| Weekly Working Hours | 1.02 | 1.03\*\* | 1.02\* | 1.01 |
| n | 680 | 678 | 632 | 705 |
| AIC | 732 | 754 | 569 | 803 |